

Opening Statement of the Honorable Michael C. Burgess, M.D.
Subcommittee on Commerce, Manufacturing, and Trade
Hearing on “An Update on the Takata Airbag Ruptures and Recalls”
June 2, 2015

(As Prepared for Delivery)

I want to welcome everyone to our hearing today as we revisit a very serious motor vehicle defect. Six months ago, this subcommittee held a hearing looking at this same issue and the Members were assured that everything was being done and that testing and expertise were being brought to bear. But there were still a lot of unanswered questions. I sat in on that hearing and raised the concern that Safer is not the same thing as Safe.

Six months later, I hope we are getting down the road of safer, but it is still unclear to me how far away we are from Safe. A few weeks ago, the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration launched the largest motor vehicle safety recall in our nation's history due to defective Takata airbags. This recall may impact up to 13 percent of the country's driving population, affecting an unknown number of vehicles and spanning 11 vehicle manufacturers.

Since our last hearing, tragically, there has been an additional death attributed to an exploding Takata airbag in my home state of Texas. Every morning I fear I am playing headline roulette waiting for another rupture. While it has now been confirmed that there is a defect affecting at least six Takata airbag inflators, we still don't have any great clarity about what was the root cause and how we know that we are safe going forward. Clarity and transparency are needed.

One thing that isn't clear is why we are launching this national recall now instead of almost a year ago when we had almost the same information before us. The American people deserve much more. They deserve to know when a national recall is announced if their car is part of the recall. I am repeatedly visited by vehicle manufacturers who lament the challenges of getting drivers to respond to recall notices, especially following a year of record recalls and an overwhelming sense of recall fatigue. Yet, when we do have the attention of consumers, how is it helpful to tell them there is a recall but check back later to see if you need to do something. NHTSA serves a fundamental and critical role in ensuring vehicle safety. It is important that it be a part of the solution in every step of the recall process in removing defective vehicles from the road.

The supply of replacement parts is also a concern. I am glad that NHTSA is acknowledging that it has a role to play. U.S. drivers are competing against a global supply chain and recalls in many parts of the world. I also acknowledge that Dr. Rosekind is still fairly new to NHTSA, and was not yet the Administrator at our last hearing. I hope we will see more action from them going forward that is direct and timely.

In that vein, I have serious concerns about where we are in the process. It is inconceivable to me that none of the tests conducted by Takata over the past year on over 30,000 inflators has given us a clearer picture and dictated more direct action. And why is it that we still don't have any deployment testing being done by anyone besides Takata? At what point do we accept that we need to completely eliminate the defective inflators and implement a new design and manufacturing process? Are all the driver side airbag replacements now using different inflator compounds? What is different about the passenger side inflators?

We have many questions today. The most important question of all, however, does not involve compounds, desiccant, o-rings or moisture. It is simply:

When will we have a plan that can be presented to the public that identifies who is affected, and when they will have a SAFE, not safer, but SAFE, replacement part available?
Nothing is more important, and nothing else is acceptable.

In the meantime, the driving public should continue checking their VIN numbers against NHTSA's database to see if their vehicle is affected. This includes those vehicles that have previously been recalled.

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